From Ma Nishtana to Ma Nishtanu: We Are Different!

BY Rabbi Moshe Hauer, Zt"L 25 APR 2024 RABBI MOSHE HAUER, ZT"L

The current lack of moral clarity is painful. The world – including some of our best friends and many of our own people – cannot seem to see why this nation is different than those it is fighting for its very survival. It is the perfect time for Pesach, the festival of *ma nishtana*, of noticing distinctions and underscoring differences to achieve moral clarity.

The name itself – Pesach, Passover – implies differentiation as it recalls the divine providence exercised at that midnight moment when the plague struck only the Egyptian dwellings and passed over the Jewish homes in between. God needed to not only get the right address but also correctly identify the firstborn within the Egyptian families. According to the Talmud (Bava Metzia 61b), this is the reason the Torah consistently mentions the Exodus when discussing transgressions that are easily disguised. God keeps us honest by reminding us that He can always tell the difference just as He did with the Egyptian firstborn.

That final plague came on the heels of nine other similarly "smart plagues" which – as the Torah repeatedly emphasizes – distinguished between the good guys and the bad, striking only the Egyptians and not the Jews. It led in turn to the even finer art of distinction between the bad and the worse, as at the Yam Suf (Red Sea) we sang in praise about the Egyptians who sank beneath its waters like straw, stone, and lead, a variety that led Rashi to explain in the name of *Mekhilta*, "the wicked amongst the Egyptians were like straw, continually tossed up and down; the average Egyptian sank as a stone, suffering less agony, while the best amongst them sank as lead so that they came to their rest at once." Even differences of degree matter.

The *ma nishtana* task of highlighting the obvious differences between matzah and bread and between reclining and sitting up is just a warmup for the far more subtle task of moral differentiation. That is left for the second *ma nishtana*, answering the question of *ma nishtanu eilu mei'eilu*, what makes the Jewish people different and worthy of being the chosen? That is a question we must answer to be entitled to complete the celebration of Pesach.

The last days of Pesach commemorate the Egyptians' disappearance into the sea that the Jews had just miraculously crossed. While there was little struggle with the moral logic of the earlier plague pressure campaign to release the Jews from bondage, this final stage would result in the utter destruction of Egypt, "the Egypt you see today you will never see again." The tragic finality of the moment led God to stop the angels from singing; "My handiwork is sinking into the sea, and you are singing?!" Yet we Jews sang and continue to sing.

God prevented the angels from singing because they failed to see why the Jews even deserved to be saved; *ma nishtanu eilu mei'eilu; hallalu ovdei avoda zara v'halalu ovdei avoda zara*. "In what way are the Jews different than the Egyptians? Aren't they all idol worshippers?"

Those angels were right and yet they were completely wrong. Yes, the Jews who had come to Egypt as moral monotheists appeared to have fallen a bit as their Egyptian bondsmen sought to both control and corrupt them. To outsiders, to the angelic onlookers, we may have looked just like the Egyptians, but our reality was fundamentally different. We remained the nation of faith, family, and compassion, reconnecting to our values at every opportunity, even amid slavery, and fully embracing them at the moment of redemption.

To those who could not tell the difference, the scope of the Egyptian tragedy rendered the moment inappropriate for song. But to those who could see how different the Jews were from the Egyptians, how their apparent corruption was an illusion brilliantly created by the Egyptians' evil designs, there was every reason to sing. Our mindfulness of the Egyptians' suffering may move us to this day to spill out a bit of festive wine at the mention of each plague and to limit our Hallel following the first days of Yom Tov, but it will not impede our

gratitude for the decisive defeat of the Egyptians that would grant us the freedom to return to our God and our values.

This is the story of our world. Our enemies' chief strategic goal as they plant themselves and their weapons amongst the women and children of Gaza, in its mosques, schools, and hospitals, is to generate one question from the "angels" of the world: *Ma nishtanu eilu mei'eilu; hallalu rotzchim v'halalu rotzchim*. "In what way are the Jews different than Hamas? Aren't they all murderers?"

They achieved their goal. The United Nations cannot answer the question, nor can the radical progressives and far too many of the university students and their enlightened teachers and administrators.

Those "angels" are right and yet they are completely wrong. Yes, the Jews of faith, compassion, and healing have had to inflict enormous measures of destruction, made to look on selective news flashes as another Hamas. But our reality is fundamentally different as we remain the nation of faith, compassion, and healing, guided by our values at every opportunity, even when forced to fight a ruthless enemy, and yearning for the moment when we can return to peaceful building.

To those who cannot tell the difference, the scope of the Gazan tragedy renders the moment inappropriate for song. But to those who can see how different the Jews are from their enemies, how their apparent cruelty is an illusion brilliantly created by Hamas' evil designs, there is every reason to sing. Jewish mindfulness of the Gazans' suffering moves us to spill out a bit of festive wine and to limit our Hallel, but it will not impede our determination to support Israel until it achieves the decisive defeat of Hamas, granting us all the freedom to return to our God and His ways of peace.

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